

A full-page photograph of Barbara Eden, smiling and holding a large, ornate bottle aloft with both hands. She is wearing a shimmering, sequined, two-piece outfit with fringe and a matching long skirt. Her hair is blonde and styled in a voluminous, wavy fashion. The background is a solid, light blue color.

Bottle-shaped beauty Barbara Eden used to pre-occupy Larry Hagman. He's moved to *Dallas* ... and she's raising *The Stepford Children*.

An exclusive interview by Ian Horner.

As all fans of *The Big Chill* who are thirty-something will remember, Barbara Eden dominated television in the second half of the sixties thanks to her pleasantly silly role as a girl on a bottle. Or, more correctly, in the bottle. Mind you, all the trouble really began when she climbed out of the bottle. But the only intoxicating thing about the show was her silky see-through genie-wear which highlighted her one marked deficiency - a navel. Genies, you see, are conceived in a ball of fire and hence no belly-button. This somewhat mollified television programmers who were mortified by the sight of an exposed navel in the pilot episode. What they'd conveniently ignored was the far more worrying premise of the story - but I'll come to that in a moment. *I Dream Of Jeannie* ran for 139 episodes from 1965 to 1970 and was supposed to ride on the success of that other magical show, Elizabeth Montgomery's *Bewitched*, which was churned out in a neighbouring studio on the same Columbia lot. As it turned out, *Bewitched* outlived its successor - by 12 months and 113 episodes. But Barbara Eden was locked into television history and has since moved on to a healthy mix of dramatic and

comedy roles, mostly for television. Hers is an enviable position and certainly more than she could ever have imagined when she began her career on the sidelines of early feature films, progressing to film work with such legends as George Pal.

Her latest is the second telemovie sequel to the original feature film version of Ira Levin's shocker, *The Stepford Wives* (1975), which was followed by *Revenge Of The Stepford Wives* (1980) and now, on CIC-Taft Video, *The Stepford Children* (1987).

In the meantime, *Jeannie* co-star Larry Hagman has made only two career moves of note: a how-to-stop-smoking video (Roadshow Home Video) and a smallish part in a comedy sit-com of sorts named after the minor oil-spattered town in which it is set. Barbara Eden has visited Australia four times (two TV specials and a live singing engagement in Sydney and a Bob Hope TV special in Perth) but she was at home in Los Angeles when I interviewed her for Video International.

I thought the best place to start was that exceedingly questionable premise for a TV show in the middle of the censor-conscious sixties - that of a young man and a young woman living together, clearly without the added baggage of a marriage certificate.

Ian Horner: You don't mind talking about *I Dream Of Jeannie* for a while, do you?

Barbara Eden: I don't mind at all!

IH: It was great fun and I s'pose you're still getting response to it from all round the world - nearly 20 years after it ended?

BE: Yes, I am. It's really nice.

IH: Now back in the mid-sixties that must have been the only way you could have two young and single people living together ...?

BE: I suppose so! Of course, I wasn't supposed to be human. You can't really say I was a young woman.

IH: Was that the script writers' explanation?

BE: Well, that's how I thought of it (laughs).

IH: Did the people on *Jeannie* look at *Bewitched* as some sort of competition?

BE: No, we were on the same lot. You know, we were all friends. There was no rivalry. We were on the same network and we weren't opposite each other. I wasn't even aware of which show had the bigger budget - that's not my business. I'm an actress! Budgets are not my domain (laughs)



IH: What about the special effects?

BE: Some were easy; some were very difficult and really tiresome to shoot because you never knew what would happen. But they were always interesting.

IH: How did you fit inside that tiny bottle?

BE: Ooh, that was magic. We had a large bottle and I would climb into it. But there were also difficult effects. Like the times I had to balance myself on a very narrow piece of wood against a blue background to look like I was nonchalantly lying in the air (laughs) - floating there. And it was not easy because the wood would poke into you and you couldn't show it and you had to make sure your costume was also covering the wood completely. I had to look very comfortable. And I wasn't. The wood was only four inches wide. It was really a balancing act. You can understand why actresses say 'What? Walk and talk, too?' This was talk and balance as well as try to look comfortable! The time spent on the wood seemed interminable but it would depend on how long the scene was - it could be anywhere from 15 minutes to a half-hour.

IH: Two years before *Jeannie* you appeared in a movie called *The Brass Bottle* (CIC-Taft Video tba) - about a genie who popped out of a magic bottle to serve Tony Randall. An ironic role-choice, in hindsight?

BE: Yeah! Burl Ives was the genie in that one. I had no idea what I'd be doing with bottles only a short while later.

IH: You were born 'Huffman' - where did the 'Eden' come from?

BE: My agent changed it actually when I went under contract to Fox. The studio though Huffman sounded like a doctor! I didn't care what they changed the last name to as long as they kept Barbara

because I wouldn't know who I was! I need my first name. They said that was fine. It's an odd feeling. You've lived all your life with one name and then somebody calls you something different and you forget for a moment who you are.

IH: When the show ended, did you get offered a broad range of roles or did you find yourself typed?

BE: No. I got a full range.

IH: Now, where does the *Stepford* story pick up in *The Stepford Children*?

BE: This is a new family driving into town (Stepford, Connecticut), after a bit of business in the city - the wife likes city living but the guy prefers quieter life and he transfers them all to this beautiful little town and there things start.

It's the children who go funny in this one, instead of just the wives. The story is based on a wonderful book (by Ira Levin, author of *Rosemary's Baby* and *The Boys From Brazil*). I read the book actually before I saw the film.

IH: Did the first film do justice to the book?

BE: I have the feeling it did. I don't remember the film; I remember the book. It is rare, though, don't you think, that a film will do justice to a book?

IH: Any challenges? Did it give you a bit of a stretch?

BE: An actor's problem, of course, is to be credible. In all kinds of situations. This was one movie where we really had to be real. We had to really always constantly remind ourselves this was a real event. I would think that was the biggest challenge. It's a difficult film to pigeon-hole. It was not a futuristic thing - it isn't like *Star Trek* (CIC-Taft Video) - but it does stretch your powers of imagination and unsettle you.

- Ian Horner.